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The Honorable Charles Schumer
United States Senate
313 Hart Senate Office Building
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The Honorable Bob Bennett
United State Senate
431 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

March 10, 2009

Dear Chairman Schumer & Ranking Member Bennett,

I thank you for holding a hearing today on access to voter registration. Under our current election system, voting is a two-step process, voter registration and casting a ballot. Without completing the first step, citizens are unable to engage the political process and express their democratic opinion; therefore, increasing opportunities for voter registration is of critical importance.

I am the executive director of the Student Association for Voter Empowerment (SAVE), a national non-profit organization committed to increasing young voter participation by removing access barriers and promoting stronger civic education. We currently have over 30 chapters on campuses across the country and represent a constituency of more than 10,000 young voters. During the 2008 election season, we worked with individuals on the ground and partner organizations nationwide to monitor barriers to young voter participation closely.

Obstacles to voter registration and, as a result, casting a ballot appeared in a variety of forms in the recent election cycle. Young voters, specifically college students, faced a unique set of challenges, which complicated voter registration and decreased the likelihood of electoral participation. Such challenges manifested in three specific ways.

First, several instances occurred where local election officials misled students to the potential consequences of registering to vote at their schools. Registrars, whose jurisdictions included Virginia Tech and Colorado College, issued statements to the student body indicating if they chose to register at school, their parents could no longer claim them as dependants for tax purposes. Civil rights lawyers and the IRS declared the claim inaccurate, which led each registrar to issue a correction to the students. In addition to warnings about taxes, the registrars cautioned that students could lose scholarships, car insurance, or health insurance after registering to vote. Since the false claims originated with election officials, disputing their accuracy was even more difficult. Despite efforts to correct the record, it is unknown how many students did not register due to fear of false consequences.

Second, students attempting to register at their school address were repeatedly denied the opportunity because they listed a dormitory room for their address. Students at Radford University, Jackson State University, and Mary Washington College all experienced difficulty while attempting to register using a dormitory address. The dilemma results from vague and confusing definitions of domicile, which registrar's may interpret to allow or not allow a dormitory. Different styles of housing (dorm, apartment, house, etc.) should not be a determining factor in allowing or disallowing registration. The question of housing is a unique challenge to students and an element frequently used as a hurdle in the registration process.

Third, voter caging resulted in the removal of an unspecified number of young voters from the voter rolls. A prominent example of voter caging, specifically targeting students, occurred in Montana. Republican Party officials intended to use change of address forms to remove voters from registration rolls despite the fact that students routinely use change of address forms to forward mail during temporary absences. Certainly, a temporary absence is not a legitimate reason for removing a potential voter from the rolls. After several groups, including SAVE, brought significant public pressure against party officials, the voter-caging plan was abandoned. Had the voter caging continued unchecked, thousands of young voters could have been removed from the registration lists without their knowledge and left with little recourse.

Beyond these specific examples, empirical evidence suggests that voter registration is the greatest hurdle to young voter participation. According to a 2004 study by CIRCLE, 22% of 18-29 year olds who did not vote did so because they missed the registration deadline. An additional 10% of that age group did not know where or how to register to vote. Therefore, a combined 32% of 18-29 year olds who did not participate in the election did so because of uncertainties in the registration process.

In the face of numerous obstacles to voter registration, SAVE has several proposals aimed at alleviating the burden on young citizens. The foremost idea, and overarching ideology, is the need to institutionalize voter registration in this country. We recognize that today is not intended as a forum to discuss solutions, yet we look forward to participating in that dialogue.

In our collective effort to ensure greater access for all voters, especially young voters, voter registration reform must be our highest priority. We are encouraged by the opportunity to address the registration process and hope the dialogue that results will yield positive results.

Sincerely,

Matthew Segal
Executive Director
Student Association for Voter Empowerment